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And the Earth Shook

Matthew 28:1-10

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Easter Sunday CPC 3/31/02

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I want to thank Mercy for her testimony this morning. She has told you that healing for her physical body was the result of non-physical prayer. Or, to be more precise, she has told you that the God in whom we believe but cannot see, has brought healing to her body. I want to be clear to everyone that we know Mercy. She has been with us for quite some time, and we have been praying with her for quite some time, soaking her in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to heal her body. Mercy didn't just get off a bus and join with dozens of other people who bring their crutches and wheelchairs from this event to that event. I asked her to give her testimony this morning, Easter morning, because (frankly) I want you to grapple with what we believe.

People are forever saying, "I could believe in the resurrection, but where is the evidence?" Well, the best *affirmative* evidence for Easter is the existence of the church, this body of people gathered together without regard to race, gender, class or nationality. How do you explain a people who continue to gather century after century, despite the excesses of Crusades, inquisitions, Jim and Tammy Baker, New Age-ism, and a charming secular culture? We are a people who talk to Someone we cannot see.

But the best evidence of all is *history* The people of the first century were not illiterate. They had been writing books for centuries. They had historians who recorded events. If you simply look at the New Testament as a record of what some people thought took place, and examine other written records of the same time period, you end up with some hard-to-answer questions.

For instance, who moved the stone? I mean the incredibly heavy stone carved to fit snugly against the opening of the expensive, high-end tomb a sympathizer had given for the place of Jesus' burial. The Jewish authorities had the Romans set a guard of soldiers at the tomb to ensure that the disciples didn't come and try to move away the stone and then say that Jesus was divine. They were smart people. They had thought through the possibilities. Yet, on Sunday morning, on Easter morning, the stone *was* moved away, Jesus *was* gone. The soldiers couldn't explain what happened. Can you?

Matthew says the earth shook - there was a violent earthquake. Matthew says that the earthquake heralded the coming of an angel, who moved the stone away. Matthew says the soldiers saw the angel, but that they worked out a deal with the Jewish authorities to lie about this. Which account is more likely? It's a question worth exploring.

Luke does Easter as a meal on Sunday evening with the risen Christ. John has resurrected Jesus' encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden. Mark doesn't do the resurrection at all. But for Matthew, Easter is an earthquake with doors shaken off tombs and some guards shaking as well, wondering what they are going to tell their commander. Did somebody in the first

century make all this up? If they did, then why didn't the whole movement go away? Why would Christians face lions in a Roman arena? Why would anyone suffer persecution and death for something so flimsy, something made up?

You know, I've tried to preach variations on this theme for years. I've sought to engage the visitors we typically have on Easter Sunday, as well as those who come here every week. Easter Sunday attendees are usually a pretty tough crowd. Will Willimon, a very well known preacher, relates an experience he had when preaching at a small church in Alaska a few years back. During his sermon, the earth heaved for moment that seemed forever. The little church shook. But, the Alaskan Methodists sat there like it was another day at the office. Their only response was the woman who said, "How about that, the light fixtures didn't fall off this time." Willimon ended his sermon immediately. He was shaken by the earthquake and shaken by those nonchalant Alaskans. Afterwards, at lunch, he asked the pastor of that little church, "What the heck would it take to get this congregation's attention? I'd hate to have to preach to them every Sunday."

That's my question for today. What does it take to get your attention? You have credible witnesses in the first century. You have a credible witness in Mercy Nwaobiala.

Sure, all of us have doubts. We live in a world that's in the tight death-grip of the facts. 'All that lives, dies.' 'The good get it in the end.' 'Face facts.' We live in a world of few surprises. But Easter is about God. It's not about the resuscitation of a dead body - that's resuscitation, not resurrection. It's not about the immortality of the soul, some divine spark that endures after the end - that's Plato, not Jesus. Easter is about God, not God as an empathetic but ineffective good friend, or some inner experience, but God who creates a way when there was no way. Easter is about a God who makes war on evil until evil is undone, a God who raises dead Jesus *just to show us who's in charge*.

I don't know this for sure, but I think that Easter earthquake angel perched on that rock rolled away from the tomb was the same angel who, back in Matthew 1, shook Joseph awake one night with the news that his fiancée was pregnant. Talk about an earthquake! Do you see? On Easter God did the same thing he did on Christmas in a virgin's womb - *God made a way when there was no way. God took charge.*

On the cross, the world did all it could to Jesus. At Easter, God did all God could to the world. *And the earth shook*. You don't explain that. You witness it. That's why Jesus, risen from the dead, appeared *first* to his own people. They had heard him teach, seen him heal, watched as he loved the poor and attacked the rich, watched him be arrested by the soldiers, tried by the judge, and crucified. *Jesus came back first to them because it <u>had</u> to begin with those who knew him best. Credibility was with them, not some stranger who hadn't paid Jesus any attention.*

You've listened to Mercy this morning. Let me tell you of someone else, someone I haven't met. Her name is Delores Winder. At the request of her son she went to a Katherine Kuhlman healing service with her body encased in plastic from her arms down to the top of her legs. Her neck was held in a brace. For nineteen and one half years her spine and hips had been irreversibly degenerating, and the medical doctors had given no hope for a cure. Her pain was so excruciating and uncontrollable that, in a procedure performed only on terminally ill patients, they burned out the nerve centers of her brain, something called a 'teature coredonamy.' As a result, she had no feeling on the right side of her body from the neck down. On the left side there was no feeling from the breast down. She could only walk while being assisted. She has said, 'That day they took me to the Kuhlman meeting, the ride over there just about killed me. So they had to carry me into the meeting.'

During the meeting, she started to experience a burning sensation in her leg, which was medically impossible. It was the beginning of a miracle. By the meeting's end she was completely restored, to the extent that she had to take off the body cast, and walked out. Her spine was restored as well as full feeling in her body. Now, when one sees this spirited, energetic woman nimbly moving from person to person in prayer, one cannot but be filled with wonder and thanksgiving at the grace and power of God.

But that wasn't the reaction of her Christian friends when the miracle took place. For years she and her family had been the recipients of the love and care of their church, but when God actually intervened and healed her, actually answered the prayers that had been spoken, it didn't fit with their view of the world. Delores Winder found that she was met with hostility and rejection for having been healed. The reality of the what happened to her was strangely ignored by her church of 19 years. No announcement, no public thanksgiving, nothing, just dead silence. These were good people, people who had suffered with her and had prayed for healing. Yet, when God answered their honest prayers, they were profoundly threatened.

***And so was Delores*. She says she had only believed in Jesus as savior. She had no place in her world for Jesus as healer. This event just blew everything away, everything she had believed about Jesus and the way he works in the world. She wanted to take her family and move to a place where no one knew her and start over again. Can you understand her?**

The first disciples also had to wrestle with the fact that the stone was moved away, that Jesus was risen from the dead, that an angel was perched on a rock urging them to go to where it all began, in Galilee, and the Roman soldiers had to wrestle with how to explain all of this to their superiors. We have to wrestle too. There are lots of things we accept that we haven't seen with our own eyes. We believe and accept because we listen with our hearts and minds to the credibility of witnesses.

You have to wrestle with Mercy's credible witness this morning. I have to wrestle with the witness of Dolores Winder, but I trust and believe the people who know her, who were present.

All of us doubt. And all of us live by some faith. Perhaps you live by faith in the goodness of humanity. Perhaps you live by faith in the 'golden rule.' Perhaps you live by faith in the power of the state to enforce the rule of law. Everybody has faith. I am a follower of Christ because of historical evidence and credible witnesses.

I imagine that as the earth shook, and the angel appeared, as Roman soldiers shook, the angel plopped himself down on the stone in one final act of impudent defiance of death, and said to the women, 'Don't be afraid. You're looking for Jesus? He isn't here." And then I imagine that this angel turned to the soldiers and said to them, "*Be afraid. Everything your world is built on is being shaken."* And I imagine nobody went back home the same.

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